DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 745 SP 039 268

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TITLE What Makes a Teacher Education Program Relevant Preparation for Teaching Diverse Students in Urban Poverty Schools? (The Milwaukee Teacher Education Center Model).
PUB DATE 2000-05-09
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Diversity (Student); Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Multicultural Education; *Poverty; Preservice Teacher Education; Relevance (Education); *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Competencies; Urban Schools; *Urban Teaching
IDENTIFIERS Milwaukee Public Schools WI

ABSTRACT

Urban teachers need a set of attributes that enable them to connect with children and youth in poverty and to function in dysfunctional school districts. The Milwaukee Teacher Education Center's (MTEC's) urban mission is to prepare educators to teach in the real world classroom of urban schools. For example, teachers are prepared to work toward implementing the stated philosophy of the Milwaukee Public Schools, which espouses goals of multiculturalism and equity. Teachers learn the importance of helping diverse children in poverty learn and achieve. They are prepared as learners, assuming that it takes 3 years of on-the-job training to become a fully functioning urban teacher, and that professional growth must be ongoing. They are prepared to: (1) remain in teaching; (2) integrate computers into teaching; (3) work with parents; (4) motivate students; (5) de-escalate school violence; (6) integrate several subject matters into problem-solving units; (7) offer social justice curriculum; and (8) work as teams. This paper discusses the nature of urban settings, urban teaching, urban curricula, and learning in urban schools, explaining how MTEC teachers are prepared for each. (SM)

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ED 442 745

What Makes a Teacher Education Program Relevant Preparation for Teaching Diverse Students in Urban Poverty Schools?

(The Milwaukee Teacher Education Center Model)

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What's Urban about MTEC?

Teachers need to know their subject matter content; they also need to know about teaching, learning, and learners. These are all necessary but not sufficient for teachers to be effective in urban schools serving diverse children in poverty. Urban teachers must have an additional set of attributes that enable them to connect with children and youth in poverty and to function in dysfunctional school districts.

Following an introductory outline of MTEC's urban mission there are examples of what urban teachers need to know about the nature of teaching, the nature of learning, the nature of the curriculum, and the nature of the school settings in which they function.

MTEC's Urban Mission

* Teachers are prepared to teach in the real world of urban schools. This means they begin by teaching in the poorest schools rather than learning to teach under ideal or even satisfactory conditions. Indeed, MTEC teachers are prepared on the assumption that in the future the conditions faced by teachers and students in urban schools may get even worse, i.e., more budget shortfall, more testing, more organizational chaos, and greater student needs.

* Teachers are prepared to work toward implementing the stated philosophy of the Milwaukee Public Schools which espouses goals of multiculturalism and equal opportunity knowing full well that the MPS system is not yet close to realizing its own stated goals.

* MTEC teachers are prepared assuming that if they are truly effective in helping diverse children in poverty learn and achieve that this will have the greatest impact on transforming school and society. Conversely, MTEC teachers are not prepared as change agents who participate in numerous out-of-class and community activities. They focus on teaching their children, working with other teachers, and cooperating with parents and caregivers.

* MTEC teachers are prepared as learners assuming that it takes three years of on-the-job development to become a fully functioning urban teacher and that professional growth is necessary in all subsequent years.

* MTEC teachers are prepared to remain in teaching and not seek "advancement" into administration, into specialized roles out of the classroom, or into the central office.

* MTEC teachers are prepared to work with parents and caregivers as genuine partners. This includes making home visits and participating in community activities.

* MTEC teachers are prepared to teach by integrating computers and learning systems in their daily lessons and activities.

* MTEC teachers are prepared to teach their students to achieve beyond the expectations of the state's and district's mandated tests. They expect that their students will learn more than what is tested for.

* MTEC teachers are not prepared to simply stop, report, and punish violence. They are prepared to de-escalate school violence.

* MTEC teachers are prepared to integrate several subject matters into problem-solving units and not teach disconnected, discrete subjects and topics.

* MTEC teachers are prepared to work as team members and cooperating professionals with other teaches and with out-of-school health and human service professionals who serve their children and families.

* MTEC teachers are prepared to not only teach traditional subjects but to offer a social justice curriculum that prepares students to live and work in a diverse, multicultural, democratic, 21st-century society.

The Nature of the Urban Setting

Urban schools create distinctive conditions that control and shape the work of the teachers prepared by MTEC. The following are the school conditions in which MTEC prepares and expects their graduates to function effectively.

* Urban schools are held accountable and responsible for the safety of students, teachers, staff, and all others in buildings under the control of the school district. This responsibility is not limited to school hours and school calendars but to all activities sanctioned by the school district. Neither the high costs of insurance and safety equipment nor the special problems created by being in unsafe neighborhoods can absolve the school district from the responsibility of providing totally peaceable schools. Safety is defined here as freedom from physical or emotional violence, or the fear of such abuse against any persons appropriately using school facilities. MTEC teacher training deals with issues and methods of maintaining school buildings and teachers' safety as well as the protection of children.

* Unless overruled by specific action of the school board, every school building protects its students, teachers, and staff from commercial exploitation on school property. This includes but is not limited to commercial advertising in person or by media, franchised stores selling services or products, vending machines, subscriptions to radio and television channels, and the sale of goods and services over the Internet. MTEC training sensitizes teachers to issues of commercial exploitation and the protection of children and their families.

* Urban school districts operate under bargained union contracts or by agreements with professional associations. These contracts and policies create the conditions under which

teachers must function. MTEC teachers are prepared to learn the legal agreements which control their functioning in urban schools.

* The urban school relates to its parents and caregivers as partners in the educational process and not merely as consumers of educational services. Parents and caregivers have an important voice in setting school policies in order for urban schools to succeed. MTEC sensitizes its teachers to the issue of parental empowerment and the work of the teacher in such settings.

* Effective urban schools relate to parents and community as valuable resources who can inform the teaching-learning process and who can help implement the school curriculum by making it more relevant. MTEC prepares its teachers to learn about the strengths of children and their families by making home visits and helping bring community resources into the school.

* The urban school must work hard to create a setting in which teaching and learning are truly the highest priority. Classroom interruptions, which number 125 per week, must be cut; this includes intercom announcements; students, aides, teachers, and visitors entering classrooms at will; and numerous pull-out programs for specific children. MTEC teachers are sensitized to this issue and to protect their classrooms from the uncontrolled interruptions that characterize urban schools.

* The maintenance of equipment and the availability of supplies in urban schools indicates that the highest priority is on the work of the school principal and office secretaries, not on the work of the teachers and children. Copy machines, fax machines, access to the Internet, telephones with outside lines, as well as the related repair, upkeep and necessary consumable supplies are more likely to be found in the principal's and secretary's offices than in the teachers' rooms. The working environment of many urban schools communicates clearly that it is the job of the teachers to help the school office function, as they prepare reports and meet the various needs and demands that central offices place on the schools. The rhetoric, however, is the reverse: that everyone is there to help teachers teach and children learn. MTEC prepares its teachers to recognize the reality of urban school bureaucracies and to use teacher support groups to try to create a building environment more supportive of the school's stated mission.

* In urban schools the rules governing student suspensions are applied in ways which create perceptions of unfairness among students, parents, and caregivers. The role of building-safety aides and the bases for involving local police are also policies that must be resolved with parental and community input. Children and families in poverty who are of diverse backgrounds are especially sensitive to the applications of the due process procedures applied in urban schools. This is especially true since MPS suspends 56,000 students each year. MTEC sensitizes its teachers to issues of student and parental rights vis à vis the maintenance of school safety. Teachers are also taught to use other means than suspension.

* The urban school setting models the value that hard work leads to success in school and in the world of work. MTEC provides teachers with an efficacy approach that explains student success and student learning as a function of effort rather than ability.

The Nature of Urban Teaching

What is it urban teachers must know and be able to do? Urban teachers know that the basic teaching function they perform is making connections between the school curriculum and the students' cultural backgrounds. Following are some of the functions MTEC teachers are prepared to perform.

* MTEC teachers demonstrate in the lessons they teach and the activities they conduct that they understand the diverse meanings students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds bring to the content being offered.

* MTEC teachers demonstrate in the lessons they teach and the activities they conduct that they understand how to enrich the curriculum and make it more meaningful by utilizing the cultural experiences of their students.

* MTEC teachers demonstrate in the lessons they teach and in the activities they conduct that they understand and are prepared to overcome any disconnects or contradictions between diverse students' cultural backgrounds and school curriculum.

* MTEC teachers are taught that before meaningful teaching and learning can occur a high level of trust and respect must be established between the teacher and students of varied cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. They demonstrate in the lessons they teach and the activities they conduct that they respect students' culture groups. They constantly seek to expand their knowledge of students' culture groups through direct personal contacts with students, parents, caregivers, and community.

* MTEC teachers demonstrate in the lessons they teach and the activities they conduct that they have communication skills that enable them to understand students' dialects and learn their languages.

* MTEC teachers demonstrate in the lessons they teach and the activities they conduct that they are aware of students' diverse cultural values, which may be in conflict with school norms or the teacher's personal values, and are prepared to make mutually-agreed-upon adjustments between school demands and family preferences.

* MTEC teachers demonstrate a vital interest in the subject matters they teach. They seek to constantly expand and deepen their knowledge base. They are able to establish relationships among subject matters and to apply various contents to the daily problems of living.

* Urban schools typically have concentrations of students with handicapping conditions. Milwaukee has approximately 20,000 such students and the number is growing. MTEC teachers are prepared to be skeptical of these labels and to teach classrooms in which as many as one-third of the students are officially labeled as handicapped.

* The greatest educational need of poverty students in urban schools is to become highly motivated and engaged in the learning process. Such motivation is the most powerful predictor of student learning. It is common for learning activities that generate great student motivation to transcend the traditional curriculum. In some cases, administrators, other teachers, or parents may even seek to stop learning activities that are highly valuable to the students. MTEC teachers are prepared to used reasoned arguments and data to enhance and protect students' learning. They will question school policies and practices that impinge upon or cut down on students' interest and engagement in learning activities.

The Nature of the Urban Curriculum

The first stated purpose of the Milwaukee Public Schools is to prepare all students to function effectively in a diverse, multicultural society. As with other major urban school districts there are also strong MPS goal statements related to teaching students to be sensitive to issues of social justice and equity, to actively support efforts to fight racism and other forms of discrimination, and to be sensitive and knowledgeable regarding the various culture groups that make up American society. Unfortunately, while these stated goals are given high priority in goal statements and rhetoric, they are not assessed in the school system's annual testing program, not regarded as basic skills by teachers and parents, not the content used in the high-stakes testing that determines who can move from middle to high school, and not included on any tests required for high school graduation. There is a complete disconnect between what urban school districts cite as their major purposes (learning to live together in a multicultural society) and the content they test for. Further, students are designated as academically talented, at risk, and above or below grade level without any reference to the goal that urban school districts claim as their highest priority. The nature of the curriculum in major urban school districts would have the following distinctive attributes before schools could actually implement their own stated values.

1. The content (skills, knowledge, and appreciations) offered reflects a social justice curriculum.
2. The test by which students are assessed reflects a social justice curriculum.
3. The amount of time devoted each day to various content areas reflects an emphasis on a social justice curriculum.
4. The material used (books, computer programs) and assignments given students reflect a social justice curriculum.
5. The ways in which students are grouped and taught to interact and work with each other reflects a social justice curriculum.
6. Students' daily studies engage them in in-school and out-of-school activities that reflect a social justice curriculum.

7. Students' achievement measures, including those which identify needs for remediation, reflect the emphasis on a social justice and equity curriculum.

* MTEC teachers are prepared to not only recognize this gap between rhetoric and reality but also to begin working toward actually offering a social justice curriculum. Since teachers cannot readily or quickly accomplish this goal MTEC teachers are prepared to work toward the goal by conducting lessons and offering activities that focus on multicultural and equity issues.

The Nature of Learning in Urban Schools

Students from culture groups other than white, European American backgrounds are labeled as "minorities" even when they constitute the overwhelming number of a given school district's population. This "minority" designation reflects the school, curricular, and teacher perceptions that students from diverse, multicultural groups will have to have special needs met before they can achieve the "regular" curriculum. These perceptions of differences as deficits are transmitted by schools into the self-perceptions of "minorities." Such perceptions move from a self-fulfilling prophecy to reality when the curriculum is regarded as an inflexible given which must be mastered by all students using traditional methods, in traditional time periods, and in traditional class and school organizations. In order for diverse, urban school learners to achieve, several conditions must apply.

1. Learners must see harmony or at least some connection between the values, ideals, mores, and customs of their particular culture group and what is being modeled to them as appropriate and desirable school behavior.
2. Learners must never have their languages deprecated or regarded as an obstacle. Indeed, enhancing learners' knowledge of their own languages will deepen and improve their own knowledge of English.
3. Learners must never have their languages or modes of speech deprecated as a prerequisite for learning standard English. All teachers, not just English and language arts teachers, must interact with students in ways that do not demean students' dialects.
4. Learning is best in nonthreatening situations. Learners must never be placed in situations that require them to act against their own religious or cultural norms. Students should not be placed in situations that require them to choose between engaging in appropriate school behavior and the norms of their own culture groups (e.g., celebrations, birthdays, holidays, music, dress).
5. Educators must be aware of and sensitive to what students, parents, community, and particular culture groups regard as appropriate school behavior. This awareness is necessary for conflicts to be recognized and negotiated.

* MTEC teachers are prepared to interact with students in ways that demonstrate sensitivity to these issues. Further, they offer lessons and conduct activities that demonstrate such awareness of how their students learn best.

* MTEC teachers are prepared to provide learning opportunities that are supported by research on how urban children learn. MTEC teachers place higher priority on such research than on customs and traditions regarding traditional schooling. In practice this means that controversial issues such as school uniforms, same-sex classes, year-round schools, etc., are expected to be resolved by data and not traditions.

* MTEC teachers are taught that access to computer learning is significantly different for students in poverty and advantaged students. They are taught to be sensitive to this gap and seek ways to help provide students with access to computers inside the school, after school, and in the community. Their assignments to students reflect arrangements they have made for such access.

* MTEC teachers are prepared to take advantage of their students' needs to learn in integrated wholes rather than bits and pieces. Their preparation emphasizes unit teaching as the best method for capitalizing on how their students learn best.

* The average MPS teacher spends $550 per year on student rewards. Such rewards are most welcome and appreciated by students. MTEC teachers, however, are prepared on the assumption that external motivation can be a starting place but that internal motivation is the teacher's long-term goal. This MTEC commitment requires great persistence because it contradicts the conditioning by most teachers and parents.

* The two most important MTEC curriculum components are related to the nature of learning and the learner and differ significantly from the content offered in traditional programs of teacher education. First, MTEC teachers are taught to regard psychological explanations of human growth and development as only partially true; that is, five-year-olds are like this, eight-year-olds are like that, thirteen-year-olds are like something else. Instead, MTEC participants are taught to place greater emphasis on understanding the child's cultural background as a basis for understanding and predicting his/her behavior at any age. Second, MTEC teachers are taught to regard psychological labeling of students with handicapping conditions as highly suspect. MTEC participants are taught to ignore labels in their daily instruction of children assigned to their classes.

A Final Note

The foregoing is not a summary of MTEC's teacher education program. It is an overview of those aspects of the MTEC curriculum that distinguish it as the premier alternative urban teacher education program and differentiate it from traditional programs of teacher education that claim to prepare teachers for all school settings using principles that purport to have universal applicability.

To readers who respond to components in the foregoing overview by assuming that these teacher functions are also taught in traditional teacher education programs, it is important to note that they are not. The teacher knowledge, skills, behaviors, understandings, and sensitivities that we have identified can only be learned as trainees perform in the roles of fully responsible teachers of record in urban schools serving diverse students. These teacher functions are taught by mentors who were themselves star urban teachers and who provide a complete range of mentoring services to the teachers in training. Mentors are supported in offering workshops and classes by other urban teachers, selected university faculty, and community resource people. Teachers are not recommended for certification because they have written term papers, passed university examinations, engaged in seminar discussions, written reactions to required readings, or prepared portfolios. Neither are they recommended for having been student teachers where others have been responsible and accountable for children's behavior and learning. MTEC teachers are recommended for certification only after they demonstrate behaviorally they can actually do the things cited in this overview and in the MTEC curriculum for a full school year and that the children in their classes have achieved satisfactory levels of learning in ways that can be clearly documented. Fostering real and important learning of children and not the completion of university course requirements is the basis of MTEC certification.